

February 21, 2011

Group Care for Children Less Than 6 Years Old

I am a child and adolescent psychiatrist and developmental researcher who has worked with maltreated young children for more than 30 years. For the past 16 years, together with my colleagues at Tulane, I have directed a community based intervention for young children in foster care. I have conducted research with these young children during this same time. Together with Charles Nelson of Harvard Medical School and Nathan Fox at the University of Maryland, for the past 10 years I have led a research project in Romania (the Bucharest Early Intervention Project) which is the first ever randomized clinical trial of foster care as an alternative to congregate care for young children. My colleagues and I have published more than 50 scientific papers demonstrating that congregate care has toxic effects on young children's development and that children in foster care develop more favorably than children in group settings.

These findings are in keeping with other scientific literature. Every previous study that compared children in foster care to children in group care demonstrated that children in foster care had fewer problems and more favorable development. What the Bucharest Project added was the clear demonstration that the differences were not due to pre-placement characteristics of the children but were due to the actual settings in which the children were raised. There can no longer be any question about family care being always preferable to congregate care.

The reasons why group care is so harmful to young children is because they need loving care from a relative small number of caregiving adults. Only through substantial and regular (daily) interactions with caregivers can young children form attachments to adult caregivers. The rotating shifts of congregate care staff limit children's opportunities to form healthy and robust attachments. We have demonstrated this conclusively in our work in Romania.

In June of 2009, a group of investigators from 8 different countries who have studied young children raised in congregate care settings met to review the world's literature. Results of the conference, which will be published as a forthcoming Monograph of the Society for Research In Child Development later this year, concluded unambiguously that young children belong in families rather than congregate care and that the sooner they are placed in these settings the more likely they will escape long term harm. There are many vexing questions in the child development literature—whether young children should be placed in congregate care is NOT one of them. The question has been settled.

I urge you to support the legislation entitled, AN ACT CONCERNING THE PLACEMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN CONGREGATE CARE FACILITIES, which will amend Subsection

(j) of Connecticut General Statute § 46b-129 to ensure that young children will be placed in families rather than in congregate settings unless they are with their parents in the congregate care or unless they are too ill to be cared for in a family.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Charles H. Zeanah, Jr.".

Charles H. Zeanah, M.D.
Sellars Polchow Professor of Psychiatry
Vice Chair for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
Tulane University School of Medicine
Phone: 504-988-5402
Fax: 504-988-4264